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## **Deprivation and segregation are persistent barriers to reconciliation in Northern Ireland**

*Areas that experienced the worst of the Troubles still face poverty, low educational attainment and significant influence from paramilitaries, even after 25 years of peace. Housing and education remain largely divided along community lines. This persistent deprivation and segregation hold back cross-community efforts at reconciliation, according to a new report from Pivotal.*

Areas where cross-community tensions are highest have soaring poverty, low educational attainment and bear the biggest scars from the Troubles. Education and housing remain divided along community lines. A new report from Pivotal, the independent think tank focused on Northern Ireland, says that without addressing these barriers, cross-community efforts will continue to fall short.

Several community workers in single-identity areas told Pivotal that their communities need internal development before they can build lasting good relations with others – citing ongoing deprivation, low community confidence, and the power wielded by paramilitaries as challenges that need to be met.

One community development leader said they often find **'Cross-community work is easier than work with different groups within this community'**.

Continued divisions in daily life also make reconciliation harder. While people live apart, and children go to separate schools, building genuine relationships is an uphill task.

Published today [Thursday, May 25], *Reconciliation and deprivation: twin challenges for Northern Ireland* found that places where tensions are highest have largely missed out on the so-called "peace dividend".

**Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal, said that: “Perhaps the most striking theme to emerge from this research is the degree to which the success of cross-community work hinges on wider issues of deprivation and division.**

**“Clearly there is a need to make positive changes within many communities before building cross-community bridges. Unfortunately, given the state of both the local economy and public finances, we risk losing the momentum needed to tackle deprivation and promote reconciliation.**

**“Northern Ireland remains divided in some fundamental ways. Both education and housing remain highly segregated. It is hard to build bridges while living parallel lives.**

**“Obviously the massive reduction in violence over the past 25 years, compared with what went before, is a major success. However, while many parts of Northern Ireland have also seen increased economic prosperity and social improvements, many others have not. Those areas tend to have experienced the worst of the Troubles, they tend to have the highest ongoing tensions, and are now dealing with high poverty, low educational attainment, poor economic prospects and paramilitary influence – as well as the cost-of-living crisis and cuts to public services.**

**“That is not a breeding ground for hope. In order to take the next step in building community relations, these issues need to be addressed. Otherwise we are asking people to settle for peace without prosperity. So far, the dividends of peace have reached some people in Northern Ireland, but not all.”**

Pivotal’s report is the first in a three-part series examining how Northern Ireland could become a better place to build a life - for young people in particular.

It features detailed research of existing studies and policies, and 15 in-depth interviews with community workers, public officials, voluntary sector leaders, academics and more. The paper examines two central, intertwined themes – reconciliation and deprivation.

### **Reconciliation**

Since 1998, peace has largely been achieved. Violence has not vanished, but its scale is hugely reduced.

As one interviewee stated: **‘Because of the peace we have had...for all its flaws - thousands of people are alive, and thousands are uninjured.’**

Empathy for the 'other' community's suffering during the conflict has increased dramatically since 1998. Equality legislation has increased mixing in workplaces, and more vibrant town and city centres have increased the opportunity for people to socialise. Several interviewees noted that many young people want Northern Ireland to move on from the past.

However, it remains the case that many places see persistent sectarian tensions, no-go areas, physical threats, and paramilitarism.

Huge divisions remain in housing. Almost four in five people (79%) would prefer to live in a mixed neighbourhood, but only 31% perceive their own area as mixed.

Support for integrated education is high but only 7% of all pupils currently attend an integrated school. Only 14% of schools in Northern Ireland have at least 10% of pupils from a Protestant background and 10% from a Catholic background.

Since 1998, there have been two landmark policy initiatives to support reconciliation. The 2005 *Shared Future* document stated that "separate but equal is not an option."

However, 2013's *Together: Building a United Community* (T:BUC) is seen by many as a watering down of the vision seen in *Shared Future* and, despite implementing some shared housing pilot schemes, T:BUC failed in its target to "remove interface barriers by 2023".

While visions for integrated education and shared education are sometimes set against each other as competing alternatives, there is potential for them to work harmoniously – but, as with other strategies, they run into obstacles that reduce their effectiveness.

Pivotal's report says: "Often the degree of residential segregation in an area challenges the feasibility of increasing cross-community schooling. In other areas closing small schools can have the consequence of exacerbating segregation, as minority communities move to be closer to their traditional school sector. A voluntary sector leader noted that in some rural areas **'these closures potentially have a greater impact on segregation than the Troubles ever did'**."

Others noted how cross-community school friendships can defuse disputes over expressions of culture in a divided area. One expert asked the question: **'How do I still oppose this parade so firmly when my kids are now friends with the kids of those marching?'**

Ultimately, however, the central theme that emerges both from previous research and from Pivotal's expert interviews is that progress on reconciliation is slow overall, with little or no progress in some aspects.

## Deprivation

According to Pivotal's report: "The challenges of sectarian divisions make addressing socio-economic need much more difficult in many areas, and vice-versa. 86% of those living within 400 metres of any 'peace-wall' in Greater Belfast are in the lowest 20% of the population of the city, as measured by the Multiple Deprivation Index.

"For many in Northern Ireland marginalisation is experienced through stark local sectarian divisions, divided infrastructure, and diminishing resources often allocated along 'us-and-them' lines. To state **'Some areas just have not moved on'** is to reflect both the persistence of many old fears and attitudes and the lack of a visible peace dividend in some areas."

One community worker said, **'People can't have good relations if they do not have confidence in themselves'**, while another practitioner in a single-identity area said, **'We need to tackle deprivation before we can even approach reconciliation here.'**

High poverty goes hand in hand with lower educational attainment. The latest published data show that just over half (54.1%) of pupils entitled to free school meals achieved five GCSES A-C, including English and Maths, compared to 72.8% of all pupils.

Instead of more investment, these areas are now looking at a reduction in help. Recent cuts in education mean a series of valued initiatives are disappearing.

At the same time, the legacy of the Troubles themselves already weigh the most heavily on these places, including ongoing paramilitary influence. Between 1998 and February 2023 there were 3260 so-called 'punishment attacks' (an average of about ten, every month): 97.5% of the victims male; 63.3% carried out by loyalists and 36.7% by republicans; and 51.9% of victims aged 25 years or younger.

The evidence of transgenerational trauma in Northern Ireland's post-conflict society is well established. The effects of the Troubles on the most-marginalised areas were disproportionately high, so the effects of transgenerational trauma are high too.

## Themes and recommendations

This report is the first in a three-part series looking at how Northern Ireland can become a better place to build a life, for young people especially. In the next two reports, Pivotal will give voice to young people who were asked the question 'What would make Northern Ireland a better place to live, work and study?'

The momentum and direction needed to tackle segregation, and promote an agenda that will help tackle deprivation, is at risk of being lost. However, steps could be taken

to change this. Several themes and related recommendations have already emerged from this initial report:

**Multiple reconciliation programmes, with significant expenditure, have not been accompanied by larger societal change** – even schemes that were rated highly by participants have not led to major social shifts. Barriers like poverty, low educational attainment and a lack of hope need to be addressed within communities first.

**Segregation in education and housing continue to hold back progress** – many parts of Northern Ireland remain divided along traditional community lines. This includes schools, but also housing - meaning neighbourhoods, or even whole villages and towns.

**Current funding cuts mean reduced support for some of the most disadvantaged individuals and communities** – financial pressures mean education, youth and other services are being cut. Continued inflation will also hit more deprived areas the hardest.

**Carving up resources between the two major traditions perpetuates division** - for some activities, communities don't need to use the 'other's' resources, which buttresses segregation. This is also an unintended consequence of the tendency to rarely build large 'shared use' projects in single identity areas, instead using 'neutral' spaces. Northern Ireland urgently needs to share more public resources and integrate more aspects of life across old divides.

**Young people need to be at the heart of approaches to reconciliation and tackling marginalisation** - through their education, wider life in the community and their future leadership roles, young people have valuable experiences and solutions to offer. A healthier democratic culture, inclusive of young people, is vital.

**Community and voluntary groups have been under-valued** – the third sector works on the ground, within communities, and has been at the frontline of grassroots reconciliation for decades. However, it remains underappreciated, with untapped potential to improve lives in marginalised communities.

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## Notes to Editors

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1. Pivotal is an independent think tank launched in September 2019. Pivotal aims to help improve public policy in Northern Ireland
2. Pivotal's earlier reports are available [here](#)
3. Pivotal's Board of Trustees provides oversight of its work. They are Peter Sheridan (Chair), Chief Executive of Cooperation Ireland; Richard Good, public policy consultant; Sarah Creighton; Jarlath Kearney; Rosalind Skillen; Andrew McCormick; Seamus McAleavey, Chief Executive, NICVA; and Alan Whysall, Honorary Senior Research Associate, Constitution Unit, University College London
4. Pivotal's Director Ann Watt is a former senior civil servant with 20 years' experience in public policy development and delivery. Most recently Ann was Head of the Electoral Commission in Northern Ireland (2014-2019)
5. Pivotal has received funding and in-kind support from Belfast Harbour Commissioners, The Community Foundation Northern Ireland, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, NICVA, Queen's University Belfast, Ulster University
6. For further information about Pivotal see [pivotalppf.org](http://pivotalppf.org) or contact Pivotal's Director Ann Watt on 07932 043835
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